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What is it about biennials? Since the mid-1980s, their numbers have multiplied from a handful to more than 160 worldwide. Venice, the first, was founded in 1895. The well-known Whitney (1932), Sao Paolo (1951) and Sydney (1973) biennials, and the Documenta (1955) (an even-earlier) appeared during the ensuing 80 years. Now well-established institutions, they rank within the “World’s 20 Biennials, Triennials, and Miscennialia” as selected by artnet News, which includes two-, three-, and five-year partri-mania. Most of the 15 other exhibitions on the list have all appeared since the Havana Biennial was founded in 1984, riding the surge of globalization and aligning cities such as Arles, Sharjah, Guangzhou, and Shanghai in a global biennial network. Some critics beat by “biennial fatigue” believe the genre, which is now a subject of study, has seen its day, or been co-opted, but it seems as though a new biennial of art, architecture or media arts appears somewhere every year.

The new Biennale de Montreal, which mounted its first exhibition, “Cenotaph (looking forward),” from October 21, 2014, to January 5, 2015, at the Musée d’Art Moderne de Montréal, is the only one not a venue for art alone. The biennial has for its theme “Architecture and the Commons,” and it opened in a 15,000-square-foot building designed by architect Daniel Libeskind, who is also among the artists in the show. The biennale’s director, Sandy O’Reilly, is an architect, and the project is a collaboration between the architect and the museum.

d’art contemporain de Montréal, can be taken as a case in point. While it’s true that the city held a biennial exhibition, founded by the Centre International d’art contemporain de Montréal, from 1998 to 2011, the issue is down with the old, up with the new. The Biennale de Montréal, says its new executive and artistic director, Sylvie Fortin, is an entirely new entity. Unlike the old, it is positioned to take its place in the global biennial network, to quote the press release, “as a landmark event on the international cultural calendar.” Fortin’s ambition is not only international. She will also strive to make the Biennale de Montréal national, “Canada’s biennial.” As per the press release, this is “a radical shift.”

The old Montreal biennial was more regional, looser, sited in non-art buildings and independent. The newly constituted biennial was born of a union between the old biennial and the MAC. It has separated itself from its founder and absorbed the Quebec Triennial, which the MAC had produced twice since 2008. From now on, the main section of the show will be installed at the museum on Place des Arts, with additional works located at partnering off-site venues dispersed across this most cosmopolitan of cities.

“L’avenir (looking forward) was present at Place des Arts, where video-and-sound portraits of the homeless individuals in Krzysztof Wodiczko’s Homeless Projection; Place des Arts (2014) looked down on the expansive square from the side of the Théâtre Maisonneuve. It was also present as Isabelle Huyot’s Occupy Montreal-inspired projection, on the Saint-Laurent metro station, and in galleries, artist-run centres and institutions, such as Parisian Laundry, Vox, Darling Foundry, Arsenal and the Montreal Museum of Fine Arts.

The 50 artists and 150 works on view were chosen by Toronto-based independent curator and critic Peggy Gale; former New Zealander Kelly Lanzot, who is executive director and CEO of the Renal Modern Art Gallery of Saskatchewan in Saskatoon, set to open in 2016; and Lesley Johnstone and Mark Lanzot, the two curators of the MAC, who have deep knowledge of the Quebec scene. The composition of the curatorial team and the list of artists of this biennial’s first iteration reflect the exigencies and politics of the merger. Burke and Gale conceived the 2014 biennial’s theme; they had answered an open call by the old biennial in 2011 to curate the 2011 edition, which was plagued by losses in funding, changes of directors and delays. Johnstone and Lanzot were working on the next Quebec Triennial at the MAC. The museum was also undergoing internal changes and the search for a new director; John Zerbe took up that office in August 2013.

When Fortin arrived the same month, the curatorial team had not yet met. She took office in September, with an assistant, but without a staff, enough funding or a program. She had a team of curators one might have expected to be antagonistic. Though the BNMTL 2014 was highly anticipated, it also met with skepticism. Would it happen? Against the odds, Fortin and the curators managed it, in just 13 months. Burke and Gale’s previous list of artists, which had shrank to fewer than 30 due to funding woes, was updated to make it relevant and expanded to 50 by the team.

The breakdown by country was 25 Canadians, 16 of whom were from Quebec, and 25 artists from 22 countries around the world. Like the team that put the list together, it was gender balanced. It did not appear thrown together in any way.

“L’avenir (looking forward)” was thus something of a triumph. The exhibition was visually rich, thoughtfully curated, full of compelling and often unexpected work and constantly engaging. It was socially conscious and politically aware. It was weighted with gravitas but leavened by humour and poetics. In retrospect, it is a bit self-conscious, as if everyone was watching, but this was true. Overall, however, it was an unusually serious biennial, sobering even, that gave the lie to biennial exhibitions as unfocused, star-filled spectacles and provided its viewers with plenty to think about. That somewhat enigmatic title was one of them, but it was meant to be untranslatable, says Burke. It pointed to the future—a subject much in the air these days—but not as prognostication. The curators were interested in ideas about the future and the act of thinking about it and what it means to look ahead from a troubled present, through the lens of the past, to a future that ultimately is unknowable.

The big-name artists in the biennial, who were few, brought important issues to the table. The homeless with whom Wodiczko worked had been
displaced by construction of the Quartier des Spectacles, where the MAC is sited. *Touching Reality* (2012), a video installation by Swiss artist Thomas Hirschhorn, displays a disturbing montage of still images of violently dismembered bodies that are moved across a digital tablet’s touchscreen by a woman’s disembodied, manicured hand, and sometimes zoomed in on. The hand is white; the bodies those of men apparently in Middle Eastern countries where armed conflicts are ongoing; the image source the Internet. One cannot see this neatly unwatchable video without escaping the ironies of the East–West dichotomy set up by racial difference or of the devices that reveal realities television won’t show even as they distance them.

Lawrence Weiner’s three works from 1969, originally made in the Canadian Arctic as part of an Edmonton Art Gallery project and on view at the Darling Foundry, take on renewed significance in light of the ecological and geopolitical threats to this sensitive region. The future health of the planet is one of the biennial’s big themes, and the Arctic, which is also addressed by Matthew Buckingham, international collective Arctic Perspective Initiative and Kevin Schmidt, is one of its lodestones, along with water, man-made disasters and the extraction of natural resources. The destructive impact of the Alberta tar sands project is at the center of three works: Swiss artist Ursula Biemann’s video *Deep Weather* (2013) and Canadian Susan Tumco’s *Hide and Seek* (2012), a series of drawings; and *Automobility* (2014), a tree of times.

Time and temporality, seen from a variety of viewpoints, were also major biennial themes. Counterepisteme to Montreal-based Nicolas Baier’s undulating, 10-feet-high and 25-feet-long reflective stainless-steel *Eternity* (2014)—as much architectural folly as sculpture—a dead deer lay nearby on the floor. Seen from above, if indeed one could have this aerial view, the huge work is an immodest display of a culture’s. Starting to come upon, the taxidermy deer from Iranian-born, Toronto-based Abbas Akhavan’s 2014 series *Fatigues* was placed as to be visible only when a viewer walked around Baier’s work, which reflected it back, with spectators and gallery, from the dematerialized, curtain-like surface. In the juxtaposition, timelessness, the sublime and the notion of an afterlife met with death and mortality. In contrast, the computer-animated fox in Norwegian-born artist Ann Lislegaard’s *Time Machine* (2013), projected into a partly unfolded mirror box, was the collapsing image of a stuttering automaton-like creature that starts to break up and finally splinters into shards of light as its struggles to relate its time-travelling experience. The process of entropy imagined, embodied and accelerated.

Hunter and Karhikwenhaw, the protagonists of Montreal artist Skawennati’s *TimeTraveller™* (2008–13), a nine-episode sci-fi narrative in which a fact-based Aboriginal past is reconstructed and a future imagined, easily move backward and forward in time, from the pre-Columbian era to 2121, redefined in the visual idiom of the virtual world of Second Life. A corporeal red fox, another piece of taxidermy from Akhavan’s *Fatigues*, lay beside a wall near Nicolas Grenier’s *Punished Land Template* (2014), an elegant, corporate-looking folly, made of wood, that fast-forwards viewers into a honey-coloured dystopia. The tomb-like structure suggests an art gallery in which glowing paintings on warm walls evoke the digital in their colour.
and graphic style, and speak to the displacement of ethnic populations. The central painting, recalling a labelled illustration, represents the “End of the Line: Designated area for problematic population groups,” which cynically offers up a mock utopia with “GREEN GRAVE,” “DECOY” and “PROPER GRAVES” inserted in “INDIFFERENT DIRT.”

Greiner’s paradoxical elements signal the failure of whole societies, and implicate modernism and its progressive ideals, for which this might be a memento. Akhavan’s dead-of-mysterious-causes fox and deer, and the displaced peregrine, owl and small birds that turn up around the show, are poignant punctuation marks, full stops that throw our thoughts outward from the curated continuum of the museum into the natural world on which we have such deleterious effect. A dire fast-forward was also implicit in End of Empire (2011), a filmic nocturne by Canadian Simone Jones and American Lance Winny, in which a slow vertical pan of the Empire State Building repeats to chillingly reveal the sparkling nighttime cityscape empty of the once-tallest building. If the first movement brings to mind Andy Warhol’s Empire (1964), its second recalls the terrible events of 9/11.

The world of global finance and trade, yet another theme, yields ripe material for Montreal and Durham-based Richard Ihgny and Manthou Lemmens, Stockholm-based Goldin+Senneby and Berlin-based Hito Steyerl. Ihgny and Lemmens, presents a long table covered with 400 graphs, diagrams and models, rendered in 3-D in materials so ephemeral they could be blown away, to portray economic analysis as an abstraction in relation to labour. Their brilliant sculpture and video installation at Vox, The Golden L58 (2014), reimagines the information on the Golden Record, selected by scientists and sent into space on Voyagers 1 and 2 to explain earthlings to extraterrestrials, as a trade catalogue of goods and services, a connection made through commerce that might predictably lead to the colonization of outer space. Using an algorithm designed to predict mergers and acquisitions in their work JDEIS (2014), at CBC Gallery of Contemporary Art, Goldin+Senneby invested $8,000 in the stock market to make the salary paid to an actor who publicly rehearsed a play as long as there was money in the account, thereby enacting market performance in real time. Steyerl’s stunning video installation Liquidity Inc. (2014) tells the story of a financial advisor, born in Vietnam, who became a martial arts commentator after his first career crashed with the economy in 2008, making parallels between the liquidity of investments, corporations, careers, water and changeable weather, as in, “Weather is water with attitude. Weather is money. Weather is terror. Time is money.”

To ground the biennial, the curators chose works that dealt with Montreal, the site of future-gazing Expo 67, and its history. Others referred to the ethos of the ‘60s, which appear closer in the rear-view mirror. With hilarious results, the video component of Stockholm-based Jacqueline Hoang Nguyen’s installation Space Fiction & The Archives (2012) frames immigration issues in the context of aliens applying for entry to Canada. The show’s thematic focal points were the source of its strength, but also of its weaknesses, when a work appeared to have been selected more for its thematic fit than its efficacy as art. Despite its focus on Martin Luther King Jr.’s last speech and a perfect setting, Los Angeles-based Edgar Arceneaux’s video installation at Parisian Laundry, A Time to Break Silence (2012), imposed on its viewers 64 minutes of tedious formal ineptitude. A star that fizzled was Shain Neshat, whose Illusions & Minors (2013) at the MMFA, starring actor Natalie Portman and funded by Don, was touted as a new direction for the Iranian-born artist. It was instead a Euro-glam theatrical of the kind used to advertise luxury goods (beautiful woman, elegant mystery man, decaying chateau, pursuit: you know the drill).

Undoubtedly, the Biennale de Montréal has given up the vitality that the juxtaposition of contemporary art and eccentric spaces can engender, even as it has gained stability as an organization. The MAC installation had a levelling effect on the show, perhaps why British artist Ryan Gander’s Exhibition’s Achievements (2014), automated curtains that move on overhead tracks to suddenly block doorway or one’s view of other art, was a favourite work. It was surprising it didn’t look like art. It gestured forward to the future and the next BNILML.
Unsala Biennale
Deep Weather (daily 2003 HD video)
with sound 8 mins 58 sec

Yoko Tani
Cosmopolitan Projection
Phase one
Ann. 2014 Video projection
with sound 20 mins

Collection pour la Tangible
Contemporary Art Montréal
Photo: Yves Trachet